

Changing Perspectives on Barbecue Sauce

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"Before you say something about the barbecue sauce on somebody else's shirt, take a look at the barbecue sauce on your own shirt." – Kid President

I was spoiled as an undergraduate student. Attending the University of North Texas, I was lucky to be involved in many student leader positions that put me at an advantage not only for the pursuit of a career in higher education, but for a resourceful and generous experience. UNT is a large public university located north of Dallas with over 36,000 students and 1,000 full-time staff members. Among my roles as an involved student, my last was becoming a sorority woman. I joined Zeta Tau Alpha, one of eight Panhellenic sororities on campus and one of over thirty Greek-letter organizations at UNT, as a junior. Much like many other southern fraternity/sorority communities, our chapter had over one hundred members, a handful of advisors, and a Greek Life office on campus with student affairs professionals who worked to assist and guide us through every up and down. Paying for chapter dues every semester was no easy feat, and I even took out a loan to pay them off as a new member. As expensive as it was to join, every pretty penny was worth it. Having a packed schedule of events each week for ZTA was sometimes stressful, but I was able to mentor three amazing young women, make incredible connections with students, staff, and alumni, and attend programs and conferences that developed me personally and professionally. Joining a sorority is one of the smartest and most wonderful things I did.

My allegiances to UNT and ZTA don't just stop at the five incredible years I spent in Denton, Texas. Those ties are saturated with many foundational experiences that largely shaped me into the professional and person I am today. After graduating, I was accepted into New York University's Higher Education and Student Affairs program, along with an internship at Pratt Institute as the Graduate Intern for Fraternity & Sorority Life and Leadership Programs. After my two-year tenure as an active Zeta, and my entire life up to that point being surrounded by what was comfortable and familiar, I became a fraternity/sorority advisor, and was afforded the opportunity to experience something completely new in a place I had never been. I got to pay it forward. What I didn't expect, moving from a large, public, southern, state university with a huge fraternity/sorority community to a small, private, urban, art & design school with just four, small chapters was how fundamentally different my experience would be. Culture shock is an understatement.

Pratt Greek Life is a unique bubble within its gated Brooklyn campus of just over 5,000 students. Students are heavily invested in their programs, they are busy, and they are often overextended due to the requirements of their passionate professors and the expectations they place on themselves and their peers to excel in their fields. We have four Greek-letter organizations, including a local fraternity, two governing boards, minimally structured Panhellenic recruitment, and Order of Omega. As a graduate intern, I serve as the main fraternity/sorority professional on campus. We have around 130 students in our fraternal community, about the size of my undergraduate chapter. Our four organizations don't pay dues

to our office, we don't have recruitment counselors, and we don't tend to star in any magazines or publications for thousands of dollars raised for philanthropy. Pratt's Office of Student Involvement has about the same number of student affairs professionals that my ZTA chapter had advisors; many students, staff, and faculty of Pratt don't know much about fraternity and sorority life; and our governing boards are currently working hard on solidifying constitutions, bylaws, and other documents that have seen many versions. The entire structure of the Pratt fraternity/sorority community is different from my undergraduate experience and what I thought was the right way to do fraternity/sorority.

And if you were to have asked me how I felt about the Pratt community six months ago, you would have been talking to a very deficit-minded paraprofessional who thought those were all downsides to the fraternal experience. Being deficit-minded, according to Vicki Washington, is "a perspective that places the responsibility for unrealized success solely on students" (2010). I came to Pratt asking all the wrong questions: why doesn't this organization have bylaws? How is it that nearly no one shows up to council meetings? Why do we have these officer positions and not others? Where are the Panhellenic dues and faculty advisors? I was rattled by the difference, and my negative mindset of what was supposedly missing took away from my experience. I had moments of frustration and identified changes I wanted to make that didn't necessarily benefit the students or community, but benefited my own comfort and so-called expertise. I was stuck in North Texas, and I kept pointing out all the small barbecue stains on everyone's shirt and blaming them for the amount of laundry that needed to be done!

Yet here I was, covered in a whole bottle of Sweet Baby Ray's. I wasn't operating as an equity-minded practitioner, which would put me in a position to "reframe the discussion of unequal outcomes from an emphasis on student deficits to a matter of institutional responsibility" (Washington, 2010). I was bitter for not understanding the environment I became exposed to. I wanted to do everything right, and I forgot that in order to make an impact, I have to not only look at the existing structure, but also myself, what I bring to the table, and how I can adapt to my surroundings. Not the other way around.

Over the past few months, as I have learned more about these students and what they want from their experience, I see almost every similarity between their successes, struggles, and dreams, and my own undergraduate career. It just looks a little different getting there. I went from deficit-minded to equity-minded (largely due to my graduate classes – thank you Professor Mayhew!). It is a challenge I will face every single day, and I intend to win. Being intentional about my attitude and behavior seems like the easiest thing in the world, yet I showed up comfortable. I showed up assuming my experience would put me at an advantage to know exactly what I was doing in my role. I showed up pointing out the barbecue stains on everyone else's shirts, completely disregarding the mess on my own. My questions needed to change, and my assumptions needed to be checked at the door. How am I seeking to understand the culture I just became a part of before expecting to be understood? Once I understand the culture and what really works and what could be improved, how am I pulling resources and solutions from my background while still being open-minded and letting my students make mistakes? What can I learn from my students? They have a lot to teach me. Am I

educating myself on practices and policies I might not have used as a collegiate member, or am I putting a been-there-done-that stamp on every idea and program? Being equity-minded puts me in the hot seat, not my students and not the culture. It is scary, and it is wonderful. What makes Pratt different makes it unique, exciting, interesting, and valuable. All of those “downsides” are what I now brag about to colleagues and prospective students. We are at an advantage, and we are surrounded by resources and passionate individuals who make us better. I am their advisor, and I am here for a reason. I have a responsibility to my students to learn as much as I can from them and for them. I don’t know everything, and I should never settle for what I do know. I get to help my organizations thrive while taking ownership for the ups and downs of our community. My shirt is covered in barbecue sauce, and I will be the first one to talk about it.

References

Washington, V. (2010). *Understanding equity-mindedness* [PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved from https://www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/WI_equitymindedness.pdf